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Childhood Obesity Fueled by Marketing Tactics

By Ted Lempert

For the first time in modern history, our children's life expectancy could be lower than our own. The reason: obesity. In the past three decades, there has been a 300 percent increase in the rate of U.S. children who are either overweight or obese, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. Although one can point to several reasons for this crisis, one culprit is the commercialism to which children are exposed every day. Like the obesity crisis, this commercialism will only increase if steps are not taken to stem it now.

Every day our children are bombarded with advertisements -- quite often for products that are harmful to them. Each year, the average child sees about 40,000 commercials on television alone, according to communications professor Dale Kunkel of the University of Arizona; the majority of ads targeted at them are for candy, sugared cereal, soda and fast food.

While parents may actually be the ones paying the price for all of this advertising at the cash register, our children are paying with their health. In addition to the social stigma and psychological effects that overweight children often suffer, they are also significantly more likely than their peers to become afflicted with serious health problems such as asthma, diabetes, high blood pressure and sleep apnea. In fact, the U.S. Surgeon General has identified overweight and obesity as "the fastest growing cause of disease and death in America."

The role of marketing in the childhood obesity problem is significant. A recent Stanford study found that children who spend the most time watching TV, videos and video games are more likely to be overweight. A 1999 study in the Journal of the American Medical Association also shows that exposure to food commercials influences children's food preferences and requests.

The pervasiveness of marketing to children is particularly troubling because of kids' inherent vulnerability to persuasion. Children under age 8 do not recognize the intent of ads and tend to accept them as accurate and unbiased. A 30-second commercial can influence brand preferences in children as young as 2, Kunkel has found.

Many advertisers prey upon children's vulnerability by disguising their advertisements as online games or by using product placement to sneak them into prime-time shows. It is through television, computers and video games that perhaps the most insidious attempts to manipulate children's eating habits occur. It is where food advertisers spend billions of

dollars each year pushing unhealthy cereals, snacks and drinks through commercials and product placements aimed at children; where beloved cartoon characters shill for fast-food chains (such as Burger King's use of Teletubbies and SpongeBob); and where advertisements for cookies and candy are disguised as arcade-style games. It is where broadcasters and advertisers put their own financial well-being above the health of our children.

The media and advertisers have a responsibility to do better by our nation's kids. Some have recognized the effects their business practices have on children and are taking important steps toward acting in children's best interest. In January, Kraft Foods decided to stop advertising its low-nutrition foods during children's programs and replace them with ads for more nutritional snack products. Sesame Street recently teamed with Earth's Best to launch a new line of organic and "nutrient-rich" breakfast foods and snacks for children. Nickelodeon refused to allow one of its characters, Dora the Explorer, to be used for a Burger King kids' meal unless a piece of fruit was included in the meal.

These are all important steps toward improving the nutritional messages children receive from the media. Other broadcasters and advertisers need to follow suit and develop business practices that will support, rather than thwart, children's healthy development. For instance, they can dedicate a certain percentage of advertising time to pro-nutrition public-service announcements. And if broadcasters are going to license their characters, these characters can sell healthy foods.

Yet more must be done to protect our nation's children, especially in a rapidly changing technological era. Digital, interactive television is on the horizon, and it promises to change the way companies push their marketing on children. Imagine watching a television show that has logos for McDonald's, Snickers, Jell-o Pudding, and the new "American Pie 6" movie scattered about the bottom of the screen. Imagine that you or your children could click on those logos with your remote control and be instantly transported to Web sites for those products where your child could purchase items from those sites directly from your TV.

Interactive television also has the potential to target individual viewers with personalized ads, increasing the likelihood of impulse purchases, according to the Center for Digital Democracy. Advertisers will be able to target children according to their gender, age, household income and race, by tracking the history of their individual television viewing habits.

The Federal Communications Commission must intervene now to ensure that children are protected from interactive advertising before it ever has a chance to become a common marketing technique. The FCC is currently accepting public comments about interactive advertising in children's programming. We encourage caring adults to contact the FCC by Sunday and let it know that they do not want interactive TV to become advertisers' new frontier for marketing unhealthy foods to children. It is essential that the commission move forward and prohibit this practice to protect our nation's kids.

Express your views

The public may submit comments about interactive advertising in children's TV programming to the Federal Communications Commission by May 1 as follows:

E-mail: gullfoss2.fcc.gov/prod/ecfs/upload_v2.cgi (Enter Docket Number 00-167)

Phone: (888)-225-5322

Fax: (866) 418-0232

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